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*"I had a lot of difficulty at first. I was one to enforce rules. One of the things I had to do with **myself** and my children was to get more self-discipline and consistency. It helped me and it helped them."*

All parents sometimes feel frustrated and overwhelmed in dealing with children. This is not a problem just for single parents. Single parents can manage their children's behavior in effective and rewarding ways. Children can try our patience, but they can be a joy as well.

In this circular we will describe some parenting strategies that help children develop both self-control and self-esteem. As you well know, there are no magic solutions. Each parent must decide what is most effective for his or her children. You will probably find many of the ideas similar to your own ideas about effective parenting.

Effective Parenting

There has been a long debate over whether parents should be strict or permissive. Research tells us that the answer is some of both. Studies have shown that effective parents expect mature behavior from their children and set clear standards. They firmly enforce limits and standards. On the other hand, they encourage individuality and independence, particularly by allowing children to think about how to solve their own problems. These parents encourage discussion of issues, standards, and problems.

Perhaps most important, they recognize the rights of both parents and children. While children are expected to be responsive to parents' demands, parents accept a similar responsibility to be sensitive to children's needs. There is mutual respect between parents and children.

Perhaps the most important finding for single parents is that this style of parenting is effective in promoting the well-being of children from single-parent families. Children accustomed to this

style of parenting generally get along better with their peers and have high self-esteem. These children develop a greater ability to think for themselves and they do better in school. And perhaps most important, these children gain greater self-control.

Discipline Principles

Several important principles are related to effective parenting.

Clarifying expectations. First, parents themselves need to be clear about what they expect of their children. You may want to decide what kinds of behaviors will be expected of the children. What are their responsibilities about their own clothes and rooms? What are their contributions with regard to house care, cooking, and cleaning? What do you expect in terms of bedtimes, mealtimes, schoolwork, television, friends, and so forth?

As you think about your ideas, use the activity "Expectations." As you write your expectations down, ask yourself, "Is this appropriate for my child at his or her age?" If you are unsure about what to expect, talk to friends and child-care providers, or read some parenting books. Also, remember that each child is unique, and develop expectations that fit your child.

After you have determined your expectations, you can discuss these with your child. When possible, be positive. Say "I want you to put your toys in the closet," rather than, "Do not leave your toys on the floor." Clear expectations teach children that rules of life do exist.



Expectations

Describe in a positive way your expectations for your children. Next, determine what rewards or consequences you might use with your children.

Expectations	Rewards or consequences
Personal care 1. 2. 3.	
Home care 1. 2. 3.	
Schoolwork 1. 2. 3.	
Bedtimes and mealtimes 1. 2.	
Other 1. 2.	



Consistency. Another important aspect of discipline is consistency. Once expectations have been developed, is there continuity in what occurs? Consistency provides the child with an ordered world that he or she can understand. The child learns, for example, that it is not okay to eat in the living room because that rule is repeatedly stated and enforced. It is impossible for children to learn the appropriate behavior if the rules are enforced only some of the time; one day it's okay to eat in the living room and the next day it isn't.

Research has demonstrated that when negative behavior is not consistently discouraged, it becomes harder to change. For example, consider the situation in which a child hits his or her playmates. When a parent is inconsistent, sometimes stopping this and sometimes not, the child has trouble understanding the expectation. If hitting has gone on for some time and now the parent wants it stopped, the parent will have much more difficulty changing the behavior. It is easier to be consistent from the beginning.

Of course, rules will change. As children develop responsibility and learn new behaviors, the rules are changed to reflect the new maturity. However, these changes are not random, but are clearly explained to children.

Responsiveness. How responsive you are to the child also affects discipline. That is, do you take the child's needs and wants into consideration when making rules? Does your behavior fit with the child's behavior? Sometimes, parents' actions reflect only their own feelings and moods and have little to do with the child's behavior. We all have our bad days when nothing goes right. On those days it may be hard to be responsive to our children's needs. But in the long run, responsiveness is important to effective parenting. Perhaps, for example, a child is crying and complaining. If this is a frequent behavior, you may respond very differently than you would if the child did not get much sleep the day before and has been upset during the day. While attempting to be consistent, be responsive to the particular circumstance. In most cases it is possible to be both consistent and responsive to the child's needs.

Explanations and reasons. A key part of effective discipline is explaining social behavior to children. Rules don't happen by chance. Effective discipline helps children understand the effects of their behavior on others. Good explanations tell the child how his or her behavior makes others feel. In one study, researchers found that children were more likely to do a boring job when told that, if they did not, the researcher would have to do it. But most surprisingly, they were more likely to do the boring job to help the researcher than just so that they could play. This suggests that children do understand and respond to the needs of others and do not just act in their own self-interest.

Explanations that focus on the feelings of others, that encourage the child to apologize or make amends for a wrongdoing, all help the child better understand people's needs. For example, when a child hits another child, you might say, "You don't hit other people because it hurts them." If a child does not seem to understand others' feelings, you might get the child to think about how he or she feels when someone hits him or her. Provide explanations to your children at a level that they can understand.

The explanations that you provide the children will serve as their guides for behavior in the future. As they learn how their behavior affects others, they will increasingly control their own actions.





"I think it is hard for me to be firm because I have to be the one that gives the discipline and I have to be the one that she turns to."

Verbal give-and-take. In respecting children's rights, parents can encourage discussion of rules, limits, and behavior. This does not mean that children are urged to challenge you all the time, but rather children are expected to think about their actions and the reasons for their actions. School-age children can help identify rules and suggest what should be done when these rules are followed and when they are not.

Research has shown that parents can respond to children in ways that foster appropriate discussions. For example, parents may refuse to change their position when a child is whining or complaining; however, the parents may change when presented good reasons. Just as you expect the child to respond to your reasons, you also can respond to the child's reasoning. In this way you encourage children to take control of their own actions and think them through.

Consequences. Rather than thinking in terms of rewards and punishments, it may be more useful for parents to think of consequences. Actions have consequences and a person's behavior has certain outcomes. This is most clearly seen in terms of physical effects. For example, not eating will result in hunger, and touching a hot



The Disruptive Child

Sometimes a child may be very disruptive and extremely difficult for a parent to manage. In some cases, the parent and child may seem to be locked in a struggle of negative actions and reactions. This situation is not healthy for the parent or the child. Gerald Patterson, who has studied families with disruptive children, suggests these guidelines for helping a parent get control of the situation:

- Set clear standards of behavior. Decide on a specific set of rules of behavior and

discuss these with the child. If the child can read, these might be posted in his or her room.

- Firmly deal with misbehavior immediately. If the parent deals with misbehavior immediately, the child begins to understand exactly what behavior is inappropriate and what the consequences are for breaking the rules.
- Give praise, rewards, and affection for positive behavior. Too often, the parent-child relationship has become so negative that the child no longer receives any positive

experiences. It is vitally important that you encourage the child's attempts to behave positively.

- Watch the child's behavior closely. To bring change about, the parent needs to be sensitive to the child's actions. To deal with misbehavior, or good behavior, the parent will have to watch the child closely.
- Be consistent. Maintain your standards, and follow through with praise or limit-setting. Children learn best when they know exactly what to expect.

- Use time-out or withdrawal of privileges. Use discipline techniques that help you as a parent stay calm and reasonable. By using time-out, both you and the child have an opportunity to calm down.

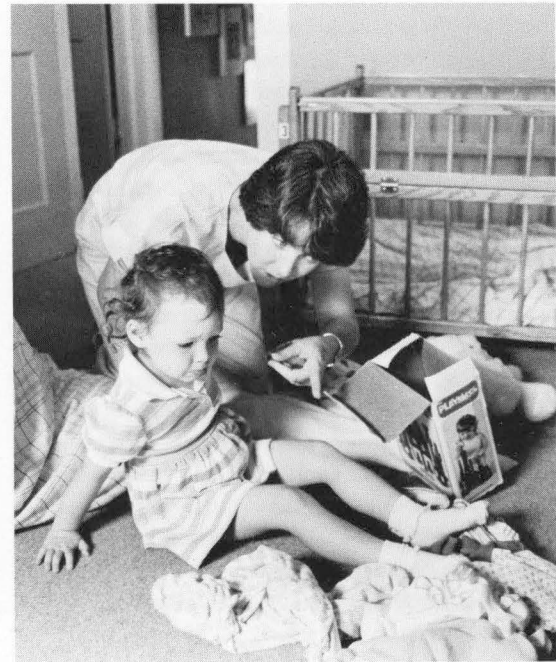
Dealing with a very disruptive child can be difficult. For more information read *Families* by Gerald Patterson or consult with a local psychologist, social worker, or family therapist.



stove will cause burned fingers. When using discipline, we are trying to help children learn appropriate behaviors. We want the consequence to fit the behavior as much as possible.

For example, perhaps you want your child to learn that hitting others is not okay. You know from your own experience with people that aggression does not foster good relationships. In fact, if people are aggressive, they won't make many friends. The consequence of hitting is the loss of friends, but learning this may take a long time, and as a parent you want to deal with the current situation.

There are several things you might do to stop the child from hitting. You might hit or threaten to hit the child. But what does this teach? It teaches that whoever is the strongest can hit, but others cannot. You might deny the child a snack or the chance to watch television, but these events have no relation to the hitting. You could also remove the child from the play situation by



Spanking

The best advice about spanking is to avoid it. Research tells us that children who have been spanked often grow up without learning how to control their own behavior. Or they grow up without feeling good about themselves. You might ask, does this mean your child will be permanently affected if you've spanked him or her a few times. The answer is no. If you occasionally spanked a child it probably did not harm the child — but it probably was not helping either.

Maybe you are saying to yourself, "Spanking is the only thing that works!" However, ask yourself if you ever had to spank a child more than once for the same be-

havior. Have you found your child increasingly resistant to change, even though you spank? If your answers are yes, you may be ready to consider some alternatives.

One alternative to spanking is time-out. Time-out is similar to any other consequence a parent would use to help a child understand rules and appropriate behavior. That is, parents can explain to children that when they behave in an inappropriate way, the consequence will be a time-out. Time-out may be most useful for handling aggressive or hostile actions. These may range from teasing to hitting.

The purpose of the time-out is to remove the child from the situation to allow for a cooling off time and

also to give the child a chance to think of alternative ways of handling the situation.

For example, your son might be teasing your daughter. After what you think is a fair warning, he continues. You send him on a time-out to his room, explaining that he can come back to the family room when he can play appropriately. You let him know that he should tell you when he is ready to come out. This may take five to ten minutes. When you and he are ready, you ask him what he could do in a similar situation in the future. If you're satisfied that he can behave appropriately, he can return to the family room.

This technique can be used with children of all ages. For young children the corner of the room may be used for time-out. Such young children may not be as able to suggest alternative ways to behave. Often you will need to suggest ways that they can behave in the future.

If you are changing your style of discipline from spanking to time-out, remember that your children may really test you. In using time-out, parents do not need to be any less firm about appropriate behavior or relax their standards for good conduct. For more information about using time-out, see *Families* by Gerald Patterson.



"At the worst points it always gets better."



sending the child to his or her room. This consequence is more directly tied to the situation. In the long run, the child will surely lose chances to play with others if he or she is aggressive. In the short term, the child loses a chance to play with others. By choosing this response to your child's actions you have helped teach this idea about relationships. These same ideas can be applied to all types of rules and situations. Try to find consequences that fit the behavior.

Positive behavior can be handled in a similar way. Children don't necessarily need a reward for positive behavior. Perhaps pleasure comes from the event itself. Most children do not need to be rewarded for playing nicely with other children. Playing itself is rewarding. Also, children will do many things for the praise and encouragement you as a parent give them. Sometimes, of course, these methods will not work. But you can minimize the need for rewards.

Go back to the "Expectations" activity and look at the rewards and consequences you wrote for each expectation. Are these rewards and consequences appropriate? Do the rewards and consequences fit the rule?

Summary

Parenting is a difficult but rewarding experience. The thoughts presented here may give you some ideas about how to discipline more effectively. You are encouraged to try these suggestions and see if they fit your style and situation. If you make major changes in your style of discipline, it will take some time for both you and your children to adjust. Your children may try to "test" you and the new rules and consequences. That's okay as long as you've made both rules and consequences perfectly clear and are willing to enforce them from the beginning. Even if you feel you're already an effective parent, you can still probably improve your ways of dealing with your children. Talk with other parents and find out what works for them. Remember that your children will respond to a kind but firm style of discipline.

For Further Reading

- Dinkmeyer, D., and McKay, G. D. *Raising a Responsible Child*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.
- Patterson, G. R. *Families*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1975.
- Wright, L. *Parent Power: A Guide to Responsible Childrearing*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1980.



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